

Bright and Bitter Flames

by Araceil

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Summary: Slash, X/HP. He wasn't the charitable sort. He was the type of boy who kicked stray dogs when they came begging for scraps from him and his mother. Who bared his teeth at the other homeless kids when they looked at him. But this time, he extended a hand to the soaking wet scrap of fluff hidden in a box. And for what was probably the first time in his life, his hand was taken.

1. Chapter 1

**0000**

BRIGHT AND BITTER FLAMES

**0000**

Slash, X/HP. He wasn't the charitable sort. He was the type of boy who kicked stray dogs when they came begging for scraps from him and his mother. Who bared his teeth at the other homeless kids when they looked at him. But this time, he extended a hand to the soaking wet scrap of fluff hidden in a box. And for what was probably the first time in his life, his hand was taken.

**0000**

I do not own Harry Potter, nor do I own Katekyo Hitman REBORN. I'm just playing in their sandbox. Special thanks to my waifu, Reighost, and to my followers on facebook for their lovely prompts and constant support. You guys rock.

**0000**

Chapter One

The rain was coming down hard as he plodded his way down the cobbled alleyway, eyes sharp for any dumpsters that looked hopeful, or black bags that had been stacked outside the food places. The place was a tip, but it was empty. He could see a woman smoking out of a window a few floors up, but she wasn't paying him any mind, just watching the rain fall upon the roofs opposite with an idle interest that only those whose minds were a million miles away could have. She wouldn't notice anything if he kept quiet.

He just had to hope none of the staff at Franco's decided to have a sneaky fag break before the Dinner rush was over, if any of them caught him prowling around the alley in search of scraps again, they'd kick his ass so hard he'd be pissing blood.

It was only a Monday, which meant that it wasn't really a good day for food foraging. Most places weren't allowed to keep, or resale, things past their expiration date. So a lot of it got thrown out. Franco's and other places like that were practically treasure troves of food Wednesday through to Friday, with Friday practically being the Golden Globes of goodies. Sandwiches, fruit pots, yoghurt, salads, sliced meats. However, every day they had to throw out the stuff that they couldn't store or reheat, things like fries, steamed vegetables, etc. He had missed the Breakfast throw out at ten this morning. Lunch throw out was at about three in the afternoon, while dinner throw out could be anywhen between six to nine at night.

Right now, he was hoping to rummage from the Lunch throw out before it got cold and congealed from the rain.

Clambering up the side of the red dumpster he knew belonged to Franco's, he balanced on the edge and carefully probed the assorted black bags with his hands, looking for the warm one. Eventually he found it. Once he knew which one it was, he went for the other bags, already having felt various containers, boxes, bottles, etc, inside them. As expected, several flattened boxes that were used for coffee bean deliveries were in there, along with a large metallic tub that they got hot chocolate from. With the tubs under arm, and an unexpected boon in an unopened fruit pot full of grapes that had Friday's date on it and a mist of condensation (it must have been left in the fridge over the weekend and been discovered that morning), he went into the still warm bag and got as much of the good stuff out as he could. Chips went in the box along with peas and veg, he scooped up some baked beans into the tin and followed it up with what smelt like a chicken korma curry mixed with rice and a few soggy sausage rolls and steak slices.

He heard a bang from Franco's and quickly scrambled backwards as he heard the chief shouting at the kitchen staff. Thank god, Old Christian caught Alex before he could successfully sneak out for his cigarette. Alex was the nastier of the kitchen staff, he took pleasure in hurting others. Last time he got caught stealing food, Alex stomped his fingers into broken glass and laughed as blood and tears decorated the ground. It wasn't until the old lady who lived up stairs threatened to call the police that he stopped â€“ the only reason that she herself didn't end up getting a beat down was the fact that she was Old Christian's mother. And if anyone touched a hair on that withered old granny's head then they would find out just how shady Christian's past was, and just why Franco never got into trouble with the local colour, even when he got caught bussing heroin

through their routes, and fucking their Boss's second wife.

He scrambled out of the dumpster, accidentally knocking the grape pot to one side in his haste. It dropped off to one side and landed amongst some boxes, and prompted a squeak of alarm from a pile of soggy newspapers.

He froze, staring agog in disbelief that anyone would be stupid enough to stick around out here.

Green eyes peered out from under sodden papers.

It was a kid. A little kid. Littler than he was.

About the same age as he was the first time he ran into Alex back here at that. Four, maybe younger. He was soaked through to the skin, tiny, skinny, huddled in a cardboard box that read 'free to a good home' on one side, he had tipped it to one-side and pressed it as tightly against the dumpster as he could. Newspapers shielded him from the worst of the heavy rain but weren't all that effective, staining his fair skin grey and black in places that weren't already decorated with dotted bruises and scrapes. A thin scar the shape of a lightning bolt, traced in black ink, stood out starkly between the sodden strands of black hair.

He stiffened as he heard Alex swearing and Christian threatening to take him out back if he didn't wise the fuck up. Any minute now and he would be banging out here, pissed off. Which meant that if they got caught, they could expect a hell of a lot worse than broken fingers and glass. His mother's special power almost hadn't been enough to help him last time. He didn't want to risk getting caught, not again.

He didn't know why he did it.

What possessed him.

He wasn't the charitable sort. He was the type of boy who kicked stray dogs when they came begging for scraps from him and his mother. Who bared his teeth at the other homeless kids when they looked at him.

But this time, he extended a hand to the soaking wet scrap of fluff hidden in a box.

And for what was probably the first time in his life, his hand was taken.

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Free to a Good Home was a quiet kid. And yes, he had been calling the boy that in his head ever since he dragged him out of that alleyway "thankfully just before they heard the tell tale bang of the door and Alex's foul cursing of the weather. He hadn't known it was raining apparently. He just held his hand and followed where-ever he lead, big green eyes darting this way and that, blinking every now and again when the rain spat in them. He was even smaller than he had anticipated when he first saw him curled up in the box.

Still, Free to a Good Home was quiet, and that was good. Especially

given the folk who lived in the other room of the squat he and his mother had decided to occupy for the night.

It was a run down abandoned house next to the railway, the windows boarded up, the plaster peeling off the walls, dust and crumbling stone in the corners, plants, lichen, and mould in the corners and climbing up the walls. He had dragged a stainless steel sheet from the garden outside and thrown a bunch of old skirting boards and some splintered railway sleepers onto them so they could get a fire going. His mother's special power fixed up his injuries with sunlight, while his special power gave him fire that burned without smoke. It didn't seem useful, until you realised that you didn't have to worry about gassing yourself in a closed room just to stay warm, or that the smoke rising from the broken windows or chimney would give away the fact that you were squatting illegally in a derelict house. There was an old mattress in their room, it was still good, if you ignored the smell of old pee on it. He had managed to find it outside a family house before the rain got into it a few months ago, he and his mother had covered it with a blanket to hide the worst of the smell and it was quite comfortable.

He wondered how she would react to Free to a Good Home?

His mother wasn't very well, after all. Even he knew that. Something was wrong with her head, she saw things that weren't real, misunderstood and didn't understand others, but always she loved him and that was good enough as far as he was concerned.

It wasn't much of a home, but it was theirs. And he liked to think it was a good one.

And the box had said 'Free to a Good Home'.

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"Get rid of him," his mother groaned hoarsely, her dirty fingers dragging the smaller boy from her Son's grasp, dusting him off and checking him over absently, "We can barely feed ourselves. This isn't the Church, we can't afford to be merciful, or charitable," she told him, her voice rough as she smoothed her hands through Free to a Good Home's hair.

"They don't know charity," Xanxus grunted, already unloading his spoils from the back of Franco's, laying them out on the sheet of stainless steel, the edges slightly rusted.

Neroli hummed absently, her eyes far away as she swayed, still running her fingers through Free to a Good Home's hair, petting him like she had that kitten Xanxus had brought home once (before she had one of her episodes and ...it didn't survive). She licked a thumb and rubbed Free's cheek, smearing dirt onto his cheek before letting him go with a slight push towards Xanxus.

"Extra hands would be useful," she stated flatly, as he knew she would, as she'd said when he brought the kitten home. Though, that had been 'a ratter would be useful'. The squat they were living in had a lot of them. This time though, Xanxus decided as he dragged Free into his lap, folding both arms and legs around the smaller figure who shivered wetly against him as he dragged over a thin, second hand grey towel and began to rub his dark hair dry, he

wouldn't let his mother break this one's neck.

His mother organised the food and some dry clothes from the wire cord stretched from one side of the room while Xanxus reluctantly abandoned Free in order to get a fire started. Green eyes widened impossibly when orange flame leapt from his hands to ignite the old railway sleeper and assorted dry grasses and twigs piled into the metal barrel drum they had gathered as a fire place.

He squeaked a question, making the two of them pause when they realised... that wasn't Italian.

Why did this kid not speak Italian? What was he even doing here?

The boy reached out hesitantly, hands slowly, very, very hesitantly, grasping Xanxus's own. Turning them over in his own smaller ones as he meekly squeaked a question. Xanxus tilted his head, he didn't understand that question, but it was pretty clear he was asking about his special power. He slid one of his hands free and lifted it, concentrating on the churning fire inside of himself and directing it towards his free hand, feeling it ignite with the hissing flickering orange and red flame.

Green eyes stared at it in unabashed awe.

Free turned away slightly, directing his free hand towards the pile of food, he squinted and grit his teeth, an expression of utmost concentration flickering over his face.

A second later, one of the grape fruit pots shot out from the pile and slapped into his hand so hard it bounced off his palm and rolled away before he could catch it. He flushed in embarrassment before peeking up at the two of them in a mix of hope and wariness, shaking a little in suppressed terror.

His mother huffed, "Well I suppose he'll have to stay then," she grunted, gathering a bucket and making her way to the exit, patting him on the head as she passed. "He'll be safer with us than out there with them," she sneered as she left the room her own hand lighting up with fizzling and sparkling golden yellow light as she moved, making her way outside to the tap the other squatters had jiggled into the water main below.

Free's eyes, dominating his face in confusion and fear, flickered between his mother's departed form and Xanxus, who still held his other hand tightly even when tiny little fingers tried to pull away. The red eyed streetrat nodded shortly and stepped forward, hugging him and petting his hair.

"She likes you really," he assured the smaller boy. The fact that he had even shown them his special power meant they could trust him with theirs, it meant he was special, he was one of them. Slowly, the shaking stopped as Xanxus continued to pet his hair, now drying into soft curls and tufts of wild chocolatey black. Hesitantly, he felt a small hand latch onto his top and squished Free a little more tightly into the hug. He was theirs now. His. Xanxus's, because he brought him home. Free was his now.

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Free was a quiet and generally unobtrusive addition to their lives, but he was so small, and had such an air of helplessness and vulnerability that it was like fucking catnip to the predatory scum they shared the squat with. The number of times those filthy, greasy pieces of trash tried to pull, entice, lure, or drag him away from Xanxus's side, or his mother's shadow, was disgusting. They had learned the hard way never to bother with Xanxus himself, but Free, with his big green eyes, and oversized clothing, and pale clear skin was too sweet a mark to ignore. What they actually wanted with Free neither he nor Xanxus were quite old enough to understand â€“ but they knew it was nothing good. Quite often, Xanxus had to use his odd smokeless fire to burn or scorch them away from the smaller boy who quite often didn't even have the faintest idea of what was being said to him. Not that he was entirely helpless himself! No. Free's ability wasn't just pulling things he wanted to him, he could do other things as they discovered one day when Xanxus's mother, Neroli, was not at her best and frightened the smaller boy from their room during one of her fits â€“ and right into the dirty grasp of Rotti, the toothless meth head from across the hall.

The second his hands landed on Free's bare flesh, Rotti started shrieking in agony. His flesh bubbled and crumbled to fine white ash where he had touched the boy's skin. Drawn by the screaming, Xanxus quickly snatched up his friend and pulled him into the garden, a relatively safe neutral zone, leaving Rotti to scream and writhe in the hallway, a backing soundtrack to his mother's own shrieking and incoherent screams. They did not see Rotti again, not until Pietro, his roommate and fellow meth head, pushed his corpse out of their shared room in a shopping trolley, swearing under his breath. He had, apparently, OD'ed on Crystal Meth trying to blot out the pain of his missing hand. Pietro hadn't noticed until the smell started getting to him. Xanxus resolutely did not tell Free what had happened. And Free didn't ask.

Eventually, because Xanxus wasn't exactly the most civilised of children, or socially aware, and his mother was... well, even worse, and not very well, they found out that Free's name was actually Harry, and he was two years younger than Xanxus. A lot of miming and puppeting, and a few drawings on the dirt of the floor explained that he was from England, he and his family had come here to the Spa Resort just outside of the city, only they had kicked him out of the still moving car as they passed through downtown. He hid himself away and lived on the streets alone for about two days until Xanxus found him in his box. He didn't know, or care, where his family were, or what had happened to them when they tried to return to England without him.

Xanxus wasn't sure if he should be happy or angry on Harry's behalf. Angry that the Scum would so easily throw aside family, or happy that they had because it meant that Free to a Good Home was his now. It was probably for the best that Free didn't know (Harry was a stupid name), Xanxus would have quite happily turned them into nothing more than ash and cinders if he had the faintest idea of where the scum were hiding.

In the end, he decided to brush the matter aside entirely. There were more important things to consider.

Like teaching Free how to speak Italian, and getting their next meal.

With Free acting as a look out, Xanxus's scavenging was more successful and a lot less dangerous. It also meant he had an extra set of arms to help him carry things away, meaning even more food for the three of them. It turned out that Free could even cook with something approaching a level of skill greater than both Xanxus or his mother. He made the stolen scraps taste good, even if their texture and looks were something to be grimaced over. Xanxus also stole on occasion, this disturbed Free a great deal the first few times. He kept trying to pull the older boy away and shaking his head, babbling rapidly in hushed, distressed English. Eventually though, he stopped, and started making sure that Xanxus wouldn't get caught. Sometimes even going so far as to use his special ability to unlock the doors and then lock them again behind themselves once Xanxus had pilfered food, money, and anything else promising that he could find (it was how they got some good bedsheets actually â€“ and he even stole a small soft toy specifically for Free, a small spotted cat toy).

Yes, begging was supposedly more lucrative for children, but Xanxus knew better than to try it. This was 'Ndrangheta territory. You didn't beg for handouts on these streets. Not unless you were working for them, or sharing some of your cut with them.

Xanxus did not go near them. They were Flesh Traders. Traffickers.

Money laundering, drugs, weapons, insurance fraud, even forced prostitution were one thing, but Flesh Trading? Human and Child Trafficking? He didn't jive with that kind of shit. Not in the least because he was fairly certain that his mother had once been a victim of them, but because those activities were a threat to his small, largely helpless, little family.

And he would kill anyone who thought to hurt them.

A promise he had come very close to fulfilling if not for Free himself.

When the other street kids noticed that he had taken in another kid, tucked him under his wing to speak, they had been shocked, and then offended. More than a few of them had invited Xanxus to join their little gangs and cliques. Had tried to bully him into their stupid ass games. Challenge him. Trick him. Follow him. He was strong, fast, intelligent, and he didn't take any shit. A lot of them wanted to impress him, some wanted to control him, others wanted protection from him. He rebuffed them all, often times with violence.

And now suddenly there's this little brat foreigner chasing his coattails, clutching at the end of his scarf? What? Did he think he was too good for them?_

The fights that kicked off were monumental for all that they were children under the age of ten. Bones were broken, blood was spilt, teeth were swallowed. And it was only Free dragging him away from the bloody mess he made of T-Bone, the nine year old leader of the Graveyard Hounds (or so they stupidly called themselves), that left the older boy alive once the fighting had died down and most of the vermin brats had run off already. Took him down to the beach to clean

up his busted knuckles, his bruised eyes, skinned knees, and split lip. Salt water stung like a bitch, but Free's hands were gentle as they carefully smoothed over broken skin in the sea water, the cold soothing them as much as the salt burned them.

Needless to say, an unspoken war broke out between the children. One that quickly saw Free losing a great deal of his hesitation in hitting other people, or in no longer using his unique talent to strike back.

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"Where is Mama going?" Free asked from above him, his legs swinging and bouncing off the sagging rusted chainlink fence he was perched on. Xanxus rolled his head from where he was fiddling with the knife he stole off T-Bone's second in command. He could see his mother with her head covered in a familiar blue scarf making her way out of the squat they were staying in, her mouth a single slash of scarlet on an otherwise pale face.

He grimaced in disgust, "Work," he answered flatly.

"But it's almost dark," Free protested frowning as he peered upwards towards the setting sun.

"That's the general idea," Xanxus grunted, "She's a whore," he stated blandly as he carefully hacked through a loose thread on his coat with the knife. Tch. Blunt as all hell.

"What's whore mean?" Free asked confused. His Italian was still limited.

Xanxus paused, he wasn't even sure what a whore was himself. "They're... girls. Girls who spend time with men doing things like..." he wracked his brain, "kissing, and..." He had seen a few of the whores at work so... "they play with your bits for money."

"Bits?"

Xanxus patted his crotch, "Bits. Y'know. Your dick and stuff."

"Oh."

There was silence for a while as the sound of Free's kicks bouncing off the chainlink filled the air, the distant throaty calls of seagulls from the city occasionally drifting into the yard with the wind. Then:

"What's kissing?"

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When his mother was out working, Xanxus often didn't stay in the Squat. It wasn't exactly safe, especially without her there. Her mental condition was enough to make the other squatters wary of crossing her as they had no idea how she would react to it. But without her there, they were more likely to try and get to Xanxus or Free for whatever reason â€“ so instead, they opted to find somewhere

else to spend the night.

Xanxus meandered through the streets lazily, Free scampering on ahead, chattering happily in a mix of English and Italian. Occasionally Xanxus would understand him. Even as Free learned Italian, Xanxus himself was picking up English from his friend. Right now his friend was chattering about kissing, about how he'd always wondered if his mother used to kiss his forehead like 'Aunt Petunia' did for 'Dudley' before bed, asking if Mama kissed his forehead, and if whores kissed people for money, why didn't they do the same?

"Different kinds of kissing," Xanxus told him blandly.

"Oh?"

The red eyed boy hummed in agreement as he kicked aside a few stray newspapers on a doorstep. Nah. Not good enough. "To be paid for kissing you have to kiss in special places. The mouth. Neck. Some people want kisses on their bits, though they have to pay extra for that," he explained, recalling some of the negotiations he witnessed between the whores and their customers. Sometimes people went to them just to get kisses on their bits.

Free frowned, pausing and waiting for him to catch up, "What makes kissing down there so special?" he asked curiously.

Xanxus shrugged, "Dunno. Sometimes they make weird noises like it hurts so maybe they're just weirdos." They continued walking until Xanxus spotted a doorstep he liked the look of. The windows were covered in yellowing newspaper from the otherside, there were more than three different news papers on the steps and a bunch of crackling brown leaves in the corners. Perfect. No one was going to be using it. Plus, it was sunken in just far enough and at enough of an angle with the house nextdoor that even if it started raining, they would stay dry.

"If it hurts so much... why would they pay someone to do it to them?" Free pondered as he helped Xanxus lay down their stolen blankets and coats.

"Who knows, grown ups are weird."

Free wrinkled his nose as the older boy dropped down and got himself comfortable. He sighed and crawled up next to him. He supposed Xanxus was right. Why else would Pietro take that weird white stuff that gave him nosebleeds all the time, and made him scream about ants in his skin? Still... if kissing someone's bits was painful, then at least he knew foreheads were okay.

He leaned up and pecked his friend on the forehead like he had seen Aunt Petunia do, grinning when red eyes flew open to stare at him.

"Night night!" he chirped before rolling over and pillowng his head on his arm and going to sleep as best he could.

Xanxus grunted behind him. "Night."

**000**

Fridays were the best day ever.

It was the day Carlos the Crepe guy was at the market, and he always made free crepes for the two of them. Harry loved the lemon and sugar ones, especially when Carlos put EXTRA lemon juice on and used the brown sugar instead of the white. Xanxus however loved the chocolate strawberry one best because it came with just a thin lash of whipped cream down the middle. Carlos always made them fresh so they were warm when the two bit down into their treats crowing happily.

And if Harry hugged the man, Xanxus didn't say anything.

He was too busy licking chocolate from his fingertips.

**000**

To most, the rain was a pain in the ass.

For Free and Xanxus, it was a torture.

"You're going to go out there and you're going to get clean, or so help me God, I will scrub you up myself!" Neroli commanded, brandishing a wash cloth as the two scrambled away from her to opposite sides of the room.

"But it's cold!" Free squawked, "And everyone can see!"

"And you stink!" the woman barked, flicking her cloth at him like a whip â€“ giving Xanxus the chance to escape out into the hall, mentally vowing to pray in thanks for his friend's noble sacrifice. The squeal and sound of thuds as his mother stripped his bestfriend and shoved him outside with the wash cloth and bar of soap encouraged him to make a quick escape in the other direction before she came looking for him.

Free was right, there was no damn way he was going to get naked and scrub up in the rain where shithead vermin like Pietro and his ilk could get a good look â€“ speaking of...

He positioned himself carefully just out of sight where it was dry and made sure to keep an eye on his friend. His mother probably wouldn't. So anyone who took a step near him was going to be in for a very unpleasant surprise he decided, fingering his knife in the darkness. He would wash later when he and Free heated up some rainwater in a bucket.

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The moment he realised what he was looking at, Xanxus slapped a hand over Free's eyes and began to pull him backwards.

"Eh! Wh-what?"

"We're leaving," the older boy declared sharply, eyes roving the immediate area anxiously. They had gone down one of the cobbled backalleys looking to cut through the industrial estate to the other side of the docks in order to hit the beach without having to go down the main highstreet and get spotted by the other kids who tended to

do their begging at the height of Tourist season. But the sight of someone so very clearly broken, bleeding, and covered in broken glass from a forth floor drop meant that there were 'Ndrangheta in the area. Xanxus wasn't going to risk tangling with them. They were a different level entirely to T-bone and his pack of bitches.

Free thankfully shut up and followed after him silently, glancing back only the once.

He never saw the body.

And if Xanxus were to ever have his way, he wouldn't see one at all, ever.

**000**

Looking for new shoes was always a pain in the hole.

Xanxus grumbled unhappily as he observed what the charity shops had available. Mostly it was old lady shoes, but sometimes you could find something decent â€“ even if they were expensive. He had, at last, outgrown the old tennis shoes he got several years ago and had to pad with tissues and scraps of fabric until recently. Now they were too small and not even the very clever needle-work of his mother could save them from the trash any longer.

"These ones," Free suddenly declared, digging through some of the ugliest brown heeled sandals Xanxus had ever seen to something black towards the back. He frowned and then goggled, red eyes widening as Free dragged out a pair of scuffed, but very much serviceable black boots.

"Are they motorcycle boots?" he gaped.

"I don't understand. But these are good, yeah?" Free asked brightly, jiggling them up and down in his arms. They were more than good. They were fantastic. Xanxus was pretty sure he had fallen in love with them. With goddamn footwear!

He kicked off his tennis shoes and grabbed the boots, eagerly jamming a foot in to get a feel for them only...

"They're too big," he complained with dismay. Way too big. Not even cloth scraps would be enough for this. These were for a man ten years his senior and it showed. His skinny legs didn't touch the padding even after he'd done the armoured clasps up properly.

"Too big?" Free parroted before blinking at the look of disappointment on his friend's face. "We can't get them for later?" he asked curiously.

Xanxus shook his head. They didn't have the money.

In the end, he found a pair of sensible brown school-style shoes and paid for them, leaving with a very dissatisfied expression on his face. They were just shoes, he told himself as he sourly went about the evening chores of gathering firewood and getting something warm going as Free mixed them up something to eat from their dry storage stuff.

When Free proudly presented him with those same damn boots just before bed, he wasn't sure if he should hit the boy, or hug him.

He did both. And even kissed his forehead for good measure.

Fucking brat.

**000**

T-bone was a big nine year old boy with a round ruddy face and muddy brown hair. He was always dirty and had the look of a semi-feral dog about him. His Da was a drug dealer down the docks, and his Ma was one of the local whores. He had no one in particular to care about broken bones or busted lips and scraped knees. His Da would have only told him to shut the fuck up, and his Ma would be too stoned to do much of anything but lie there and earn her keep. His gang were mostly boys, but a few of the more ugly and vicious girls, unsuited for whoring, were in there too.

And Harry was alone when he ran into them.

It didn't happen often. He and Xanxus were fairly glued to the hip, but he was sick. Hence why Harry was on his own " heading to the Pharmacy on the highstreet so he could steal some medicine for his friend. Only he had to run into T-bone and his gang half way there. Unlike Xanxus, he was not proud, and he knew a losing battle when he saw one. Instead of squaring up, standing his ground, Harry took one look at the group, counted them, calculated his odds " and then ran the fuck away.

Which, of course, meant that he now had about fifteen kids shouting and hollering at him, giving chase.

Good luck to them, he thought viciously, not even Piers, arguably the fastest little shit in Little Whinging, could catch him outside of a playground.

He jumped onto a set of railings, bypassing the disabled ramps entirely and launched himself from one railing to the other before landing and racing off down through another back-street. He could still hear shouting behind him, further away though, and falling back. He was pulling ahead.

The dead end was " not good.

Thankfully it was only a chainlink fence with a bunch of feathers and leather braids and paper strips tied into it. He launched himself up and onto it, scaling the twelve foot high obstacle and dropping down on the otherside just as T-bone and his gang rounded the corner.

"The fuck did he go?!" one of the girls screeched.

"He ain't 'ere!" a boy snarled. "You sure you saw him go down 'ere?" he demanded getting in the face of one of the other guys.

"I fuckin' saw it!" the blond snapped, shoving him away. A fight kicked off in short order while Harry stood behind the chainlink, confused, and more than a little out of his depth.

Could they not... see him... through the chainlink?

"Aren't you a little young to be on this side of the chain?" a voice rasped from behind him.

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**And chapter end. I'll be covering Xanxus and Harry's lives on the streets in a drabble format at least until I get into the proper MEAT of the fic. They're adorable but there isn't much plot happening right now beyond the typical growing pains of, well, growing up together. **

2. Chapter 2

**0000**

BRIGHT AND BITTER FLAMES

**0000**

Slash, X/HP. He wasn't the charitable sort. He was the type of boy who kicked stray dogs when they came begging for scraps from him and his mother. Who bared his teeth at the other homeless kids when they looked at him. But this time, he extended a hand to the soaking wet scrap of fluff hidden in a box. And for what was probably the first time in his life, his hand was taken.

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**0000**

Chapter Two

Magic was real. On the otherside of that chainlink fence was a whole little community of people with the same ability as him. A tiny community. Just as dirty and poor and unhappy as the one he left on the otherside of the chain.

"Most of the old families, they got money. Lot's o' money," the bag lady explained roughly as she braided the thin strips of... whatever they were, together. Her rainbow coloured nails flashing and changing colours as she did so in a constant shift of light that flickered and danced like fire around the braiding. "But folk like us? Mudbloods? Once we're done with our schooling that's it, buh bye, not a helpin' hand to be found, or a job to be rustled up," she complained bitterly. "We're left to make our own way. Carve it if we have ta."

Her blue eyes were like a crow's, beady, sharp, intelligent, and a little malicious as she stared up at him with all the shrewdness of that old geezer that sometimes came to the squat in order to get money out of Gregori upstairs.

"You got it too, had to, to get over the Chain. Ta even _see_ it." With a deft twist that somehow carried a sound of snapping bone, she tied off the braid and thrust it out to him. "Sit down. You're never too young to learn a little something."

Harry grimaced, "I want to â€" but my friend, he's sick, I need to go, he needs me," he explained to her, gently trying to return the cord.

But she smiled, hard blue eyes bright with something almost like approval. "Keep it. Give it to him. It'll help wit' his fever. Go."

Harry went. Scaling the Chainlink like a monkey and dropping down onto the otherside he fled back through the streets, making sure to check that T-bone wasn't anywhere near-by.

Even though he wanted to trust the old lady, he wasn't about to put Xanxus's health in her hands, even if she claimed she knew magic. He stopped by the Pharmacy and stole some off the shelf medicine and even some behind the counter stuff when he managed to rig a successful distraction by having one of the display stands topple and spill its contents across the floor.

He sped off back home.

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Mama was having an episode.

Xanxus was sick.

And she was hacking at everything in the room with a rusted sickle. Cold baked beans were spewed out across the floor and the mattress Xanxus was on had a new hole next to his head. Harry was pretty sure he stopped breathing. He didn't want to hurt her, but -

The red light he threw at her made the woman crumple immediately, her feet slipping in the baked beans as she hit the ground with a dull thud, sickle falling from nerveless fingers. He kicked it aside and hastily made sure Xanxus was alright.

No damage, no stab wounds, nothing. His blankets hadn't even been disturbed.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, his arms going wobbly as he leaned down and just... he pressed his head against his bestfriend's chest, feeling his heat, listening to the thud of his heart. He swore his blood had run cold when he walked in and saw that scene.

He sniffled, feeling a burn in his eyes as he gripped Xanxus's too big shirt and trembled. He thought â€" he thought she had â€" that she had used the â€" but she hadn't, she hadn't. He was alright â€" well, not alright, but he wasn't hurt!

Carefully, because he was still sick, Harry dug out all the medicine he got. Painstakingly trying to read through them all, only he couldn't read Italian, and he couldn't read English so well either.

He sobbed in frustration. He couldn't just give him whatever, he knew that if you mixed drugs it did bad things and he didn't want to hurt Xanxus, have him end up like Pietro and the other druggies across the hall. He threw the medicine against the wall with a sob before remembering the bag lady. She said it would help but "he didn't know, he supposed he could tie it on and see what happened. If it didn't work, he could ask someone to tell him what the medicines did. Gregori upstairs might tell him if he paid him. He had a jam-jar of Euros stashed away under the floorboards. It wasn't much. Only about thirty two Euro, but it would have been enough to buy a very nice meal, or dry store goods for a month if they were ever in a big enough pinch to need it. And just for a bit of reading, he hoped Gregori would be willing...

Carefully, he knotted the length of whatever it was the lady braided around Xanxus's wrist.

He briefly entertained the idea of curling up beside him but instead, he hauled Neroli up off the floor and the puddle of food waste. He dragged her dirty skirts and shawl off, throwing them in one of the buckets to be washed and wrapped her up in a blanket. He got her onto her pile of newspapers and black binliners "all filled with clothes and old newspapers and other plastic bags to make a nice mattress. And then he cleaned up the mess from her rampage.

He scraped up all the beans and put them to one side to get washed later. He would cook them tonight, mash them up with some of the dry pasta and tinned tomatoes. He scrubbed Neroli's shirt and skirts outside in the garden under the water tap, trying to get the worst of the stains out. He hung them to dry in their room in front of the window and then, only then, did he finally give into his desire to curl up beside his bestfriend.

Laying his head down on the older boy's chest, he curled up under his arm and, even though he tried to stay awake, he eventually fell asleep listening to the steady dull throb of his heartbeat in one ear.

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Xanxus couldn't see through the Chain.

The next morning, Harry woke up wrapped in his blanket alone and panicked. He found his friend outside scrubbing his face in a bucket of cold water and nearly tackled him into it. He was fine. He was actually alright! There was no fever, no rash, no cold sweat or shivers. The little braid around his wrist worked.

So he told Xanxus what happened, about running away from T-bone's gang, the chainlink, the bag lady, the braid, and how he couldn't read the medicine bottles so he tried it and it WORKED!

But now that he'd dragged his friend over there... Xanxus couldn't see the chainlink. It looked like a solid brick wall, just an alcove in a building with space for dumpsters. He was giving Harry a very poopoo look that made his eyes burn. He wasn't lying!

"No, no! It's here! I swear!" he exclaimed, grabbing his friend's hand and rushing over. He could see the chainlink clearly. He pressed Xanxus's hand against it, "Do you feel it? She said that you had to

have magic to see it. But if it's there you should feel it, right?" he asked, watching as red eyes went wide and felt through the brick wall. Traced the chainlink under his fingertips that he couldn't see.

A vicious grin stole over his features, "Isn't the world full of surprises," he said, baring his teeth at the Chain.

Harry grinned brightly, "Yup! Let's go!" he exclaimed, he wanted Xanxus to meet the bag lady.

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The bag lady's name was Elda. And she seemed completely unsurprised to see 'the little lord' as she called Xanxus, much to his scowling disgust and her amusement. Elda was a woman who apparently didn't believe in social niceties. She never bothered with their names, dubbing Xanxus as Little Lord and Harry as Little Knight, and immediately launched into teaching them odd symbols and words that apparently had power when used by the youngest of the two.

Xanxus sat cross legged, watching as the symbols that Harry drew glowed with power, flickering and flashing in the air like living flames. His green eyes lighting up in excitement as the old woman wove symbols of light into white birds to carry messages through the air; showed him how to drip watered down ink from ball point pens onto old CDs to scry the future or the present; how to combine dried coffee grounds, table-salt with chipped white paint from the road markings to make 'wards' to drive off unwanted attention. He smiled softly as his bestfriend learned to whistle, tap his feet, and work his magic to the motion of his feet, and the shrill of his song.

Harry's appetite for magic was voracious. Any chance, any opportunity, he would drag Xanxus with him to visit the woman hidden behind the Chain. Any time Harry vanished, nine times out of ten, when Xanxus went looking for him, he was already there.

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"I hate reading," Free complained bitterly as he laboriously picked his way through the old text book that Elda lent him in order to learn more runes between his visits.

Xanxus snorted from where he was lounging on the broken chainlink fence behind him, he'd folded the metal over so that it lay like a hammock between the metal posts and he lazily watched the clouds gathering on the horizon while fiddling with his knife. "Then stop. S'not like I can read," he grunted, cleaning under his fingernails.

The younger of the two pulled a face, "Knowing how to read is important though," he pointed out seriously, "I couldn't read those medicine bottles that I stole, which meant I couldn't help you when you got sick! What if the magic hadn't worked? I need to learn to read. Plus, she said that there were more runes in here, if I learn how to read I'll know which runes are for what without having to ask her!" he explained excitedly, waving the book at him.

Xanxus hummed and rolled over slightly, planting a hand on top of his friend's head and digging his fingers into his dirty hair, "Stop complaining then," he ordered, tugging gently at his hair.

Free rolled his head back and stuck his tongue out at him, "Just because I have ta do it, doesn't mean I like it," he pointed out.

**0000**

It had been raining for three weeks straight. Not a storm, just a constant, steady, beat of water. Thick grey rain drops during the night, the occasional light mist of drizzle during the afternoon but it didn't stop. For three weeks.

The squat flooded.

It took three days, but it resulted in Free, Xanxus, and Neroli moving upstairs. They took a corner of the hallway furthest back from the doors, under a broken window. It was scary, and tense, because everyone from downstairs had to come up and there were only three rooms up here â€“ Gregori's room was a no go. Everyone knew that. He was working for some dangerous people, and if anyone went in there, they would get shot. One of the other rooms they discovered was a trash heap, no one could stay in there as the floor was so rotted that even Free's foot broke through the boards to the floor below. The final room was occupied by a small immigrant family who were quickly hustled into the corridor as Pietro and his other addicts took over their room.

The two families sandwiched themselves between the empty room and Gregori's wall, one person awake at all hours, keeping a watch over the rest. Fearful and wary of the suited man who came to visit Gregori on days when the rain was lighter, and of the meth heads screaming in the other room.

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"I wish magic could push away the rain," Free complained one day, leaning against the broken windowsill and watching the roofless house opposite cascade with water like a scene from a renaissance painting.

Xanxus hummed, head pillowied on his leg as he dozed, "We can ask Elda next time," he mumbled burying his nose in the back of Free's knee.

Free hummed softly, a careless ditty as he stared up at the clouds, his bestfriend dropping into a deeper sleep, breath puffing warmly against his leg. He would have liked to go now and ask her, but with the rain being as it was, he was likely to get washed away the moment he set foot into the garden â€“ and there was no way Xanxus would want to go. Swimming at the river or the beach was one thing, but he hated rain. He hated getting wet by anything. He was such a cat. He smiled, looking down at his friend and petting his hair, grinning when his face screwed up in an irate scowl and he batted Harry's hand away. Affection on his terms, and his alone, at times he wants it, not before.

Harry gave the outside a longing look before turning and curling up

along with him. It was Friday. He hoped Carlos wasn't out in this, or worrying too much about them.

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There were indeed ways to control the weather, Elda told them.

Ways to roar thunder storms and scream lightning strikes above, sing the rains, and charm the plants and animals to grow and bend to your will. It was the breath, the flow of air through your lungs and your mouth, you breathed life, magic, into your songs into your voice, and you wove it like threads in a tapestry, like shafts of light into his messenger birds. She taught him how to listen for lyrics that would bend and shape the world around him to his will, to listen for the strains of music he could hum to that would do the same, how to whistle runes and sigils to life at a distance, or even how to influence the mind and soul.

And then she sang an end to the rain storm that drowned them for three weeks until the drizzle was light enough for the two children to risk running to her for an end to it. She sang the clouds to part and the sun to glare, and the world was bright again. Water drops casting rainbows and glittering lights across the world, hanging like stars in the shadows of awnings and doorsteps.

"Teach me!" Harry begged, gripping her skirts desperately, green eyes wide.

So she did.

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For someone who was often so active, it was difficult for Free to sit down and just listen to the world around him. Elda had him doing something she called meditation, supposedly it was so he could calm his mind and open himself to the powers around him and listen for the music that would tell him how to use magic to call away the rain.

For Xanxus, it was hilarious watching his normally so flighty friend try to remain still.

He watched from where he was lounging on top of a wet dumpster, the lid closed and conveniently in the middle of a sunbeam, so while his stomach was wet from rain, his back was pleasantly warm thanks to the sun. And he had a great source of entertainment in watching the younger boy wriggle in his seat, wrinkling his nose every now and again, roll his shoulders, fidget, and peek his eyes open every now and again to make sure they hadn't left. It was hilarious watching him try to meditate.

He tried. He really did.

If points could be awarded for effort, he would probably get ten out of ten.

Unfortunately, Free only had so much patience.

After an hour and a half of trying, he threw himself backwards into a puddle with a yell of frustration and just lay there.

"This is _impossible_!" he complained bitterly, "Nothing in my head will shut up!" he told the old woman plaintively.

She chuckled, "Learning how to meditate is not an easy thing. You won't get it on the first go, nor even on the fifth. Come again tomorrow."

Free was bitter with defeat as they made their way home, kicking puddles and muttering under his breath as they went. The next morning, Xanxus was not surprised to find him sat cross legged on their mattress, motionless and twitching as he apparently tried to practice. With an annoyed sigh, as the sun had not yet even risen, Xanxus flung an arm around his friend and twisted until he was comfortable, using his lap as a pillow, and the blankets were back in place, bunched up around the both of them and went back to sleep, feeling his friend's fingers find a familiar home in his dirty hair.

It was easier, Harry discovered, to let go of his thoughts when he focused only on stroking his friend's hair.

He fancied he could hear whispering on the wind.

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They had almost run out of food during the flood, their dry stores were half-ruined by the damp and what the two children had managed to salvage from downstairs was stolen by anyone who thought to try it while Neroli was away with the fairies, and the two of them were outside. Thankfully, Free's jar of savings, though submerged in mud and water, and probably sewage, had survived under the floorboards undiscovered.

He had been adding to it before the flood so now they were sat pretty on fifty Euro.

Once they had finished clearing out the downstairs, repairing what they could of the water damage, laying down new cardboard and newspaper, sweeping out debris and dirt, mopping up the worst of the water that still occasionally seeped out of the floorboards. They bought black bin-liners, stole cardboard boxes and wooden crates from behind businesses and remade their room. Now, half the room was elevated on top of the crates, covered with black bin-liners they were semi waterproof and with the cardboard at least somewhat clean and soft underfoot. It was on this raised bit that they placed their mattress and the assorted stuffed bags that acted as Neroli's bed. They laid the rescued length of sheet metal on the lower section along with the steel drum they stole from the docks. What few tins of food were stacked against the wall on the sheet metal furthest away from the door, and once they'd finished sorting their room out, Xanxus and Free left in order to add to their food stock.

More pasta, tins, jars, condiments, spices, herbs, powdered milk and eggs, tea bags, plastic bags. They got toilet paper, wet-wipes, wash cloths, soap, a flashlight, and even though he objected, Free threw down the money in order to get Xanxus some proper socks and underwear as the ones he had were old, too small, and currently held together with more safety pins than fabric.

And if he picked up one of those cheap, girlish craft kits full of feathers and plastic beads and glitter, Xanxus didn't comment, because he could already hear Free muttering about carving sigils onto the beads and how the red would work with this protection rune better than a blue one, and how orange would work well with that rune, and pink would work best but he knew better than to include it because it wouldn't be worn and -

Xanxus tuned him out as they continued on through the check out, and then proceeded to steal one of the shopping trollies, AND a basket.

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Elda squinted sceptically at Free when next he sat down to meditate. He was still fidgeting, still restless and unable to really settle, but whatever she was seeing, she was unhappy with the fact that it wasn't what she expected to see.

She didn't say anything though, just continued to fiddle with her pigeon feathers and rat bones.

They left after an hour, Free frustrated to the point of trying to tear his hair out.

**0000**

The Graveyard Hounds were at war again.

They weren't even bothering with Xanxus and Free anymore, too busy focusing on the Dock kids who had been caught trying to tag territory that wasn't theirs. One of them stabbed one of T-bone's bitches and now it was a bloody battle of retribution.

It was better than TV!

The two loners sat on the outskirts of the conflict watching in amusement as fist fights escalated into almost out and out riots. T-bone sent his girls in to try and flirt information out, only to have them vanish and turn up beaten bloody and abandoned in gutters â€“ one girl got an infection in her eye, if it didn't clear up soon, she'd probably die, and even if it did, she'd be blind afterwards. T-bone was furious and the violence only escalated from that point on.

It was less amusing when the girl died, and T-bone walked into the middle of the Docks and shot the head of the other gang with a small handgun he stole off his Da.

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The fighting between the kids was escalating. It was drawing in the teenagers, and catching the attention of the wrong people.

Xanxus and Free hightailed it from the area, back to their squat. 'Ndrangheta were sniffing around for potential recruits, they had taken note of Xanxus before, but deemed him too young to give much of a care about at the time. He didn't want to catch their eyes now. For one, he didn't think he'd be able to escape if he refused them â€“ and it was well known that no one really could refuse the 'Ndrangheta

when they 'offered' you a place amidst their vast collection of Famiglias.

They made sure to stay in their room when Gregori's employer showed up as well. They weren't sure, but Free was pretty positive that he worked for the 'Ndrangheta, logistics or finance, or something. There was always a lot of talk about money and pipeline flow whenever he was there.

Free visited Elda only the once since T-bone's first kill. She told him to forget meditating for now, instead, she showed him how to draw maps with chalk and how to Scry using a broken piece of glass.

"Crystal, from a brandy tumbler. You'll have to rummage behind the scenes of some pretty pricey places to get it, brat. Buon Gusto would be your best bet," she told him as she held the broken shard above the chalk drawing and showed him how to find fresh water, how to find a person, how to find something as ambivalent and vague as a 'safe place to sleep'. And then she sent him on his way, telling him to take only what he needed and to be quick about it.

It left a bad feeling in his stomach, making him twitchy for days. Days that he spent making sure to have their belongings packed ready for a quick departure â€“ he even took his rapidly refilling jar of Euros out from under the floorboards and stored them in his backpack.

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It was the middle of the night, and they came without warning.

They woke to the sound of doors being broken in, startled screams, and commands to 'Get on your knees' being bellowed ferociously from behind weaponry in the darkness.

Police Raid.

Xanxus had been in only the one before now. At their old squat, someone got a tip off about a serial killer hiding amidst the homeless population and Dispatch sent in the police. His mother was triggered and had an episode, she very nearly got herself killed attacking the officer that tore through the thin sheeting that they used to keep their little square of space separate from the other women in the squat. It was the closest Xanxus had ever come to feeling true, genuine fear. When he had to escape that crumbling house with the sound of gun-fire echoing in his ears, guiding his panicking and wailing mother behind him through the bushes.

It was just like that day all over again.

His mother started screaming, so aggressively jarred awake by the sudden attack on their private space that she immediately flew into an episode. Free woke with a startled scream, not expecting it either. He had never been forced to deal with the police in such a highly aggravated manner; he didn't even know it was the police.

The man that burst into their room â€“ quickly found himself flung clean back out of it and smashed into the wall opposite.

Xanxus scrambled out of their bedding, snatching Free's arm and grabbing their stuff. They had to leave, they had to leave NOW.

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The small family of three fled the squat with their bags, only just barely getting out as the police were more interested in Gregori upstairs and the fact that Pietro and his three friends suddenly went fucking feral and started attacking them with syringes, broken bottles, teeth, nails, anything they could get their fucking hands on. One woman and a pair of kids was hardly going to be a priority.

They spent the day hiding at an old playground, no longer in use by anyone. It took a long time to calm Neroli down as she started hitting herself, pulling her hair, and groaning. Free was shaking hard enough to rattle the monkeybars he was hiding under as he crouched, arms wrapped around himself pressing his back against the derelict metal supports. Xanxus floundered, trying to calm his mother, unable to devote any attention to his bestfriend when he was trying so hard to stop the older woman from clawing her eyes out.

They needed to find somewhere else to live, preferably on their own! No more squats! No more druggies, pedos, or money launderers! A place just for them!

When Free finally calmed down, he pulled open his bag and dug out a broken shard of mirror and a ball-point pen that he proceeded to unscrew. He spent the next ten minutes Scrying a safe place for them to stay.

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Xanxus vetoed the Womens' Shelter hard enough to nearly drive Free to tears before he sucked in a deep breath and got the mirror out again.

He had been to the shelter once before, they'd tried to forcibly separate him from his mother and take her into an asylum, they tried to force him into foster care, and they thought he hadn't heard them whispering their plans, making their notes on their nasty black little clipboards, smiling at them while they kept their forked tongues behind their teeth. Xanxus would not be making the mistake of trusting those smiling vipers again. It may have been a safe place, but it wasn't a good place.

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The shack was dilapidated, but the roof was sound, and the concrete was slightly raised. There were no holes in the walls, or signs of animals living in there. It was a tiny three metre by three metre single concrete room on the edge of the railway tracks. Probably used to store sleepers or other equipment back in the day, but now was long forgotten and covered in ivy, the door rusted shut to its frame, leaving just the broken windows for entrance.

Free scryed it and lead them down the tracks until they found it, it

was getting dark now so they all piled in. Free lit up their little solar-powered lantern that he'd swiped from a camping store in town before they dug into their bags and pulled out ratty T-shirts and jackets to cover the windows, so the light wouldn't give them away. They pulled out the towels and blankets they'd stuffed into the straining fabric and folded them up to make crude bedrolls, just enough so that they didn't freeze or get bruises from the cold concrete beneath them. Then Free used an empty baked bean tin to start a fire that would hopefully keep them warm during the night. Their dinner was dry honey granola, honey BBQ jerky, and bottled water. They'd eaten worse.

Xanxus went to sleep cuddling Free up to his chest in order to soak in as much warmth as he could.

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Since they'd lost all of their stored food, and Free's little jar of Euros was no where near what it used to be, both he and Xanxus took a risk and went to the soup kitchen run by the Church. All you had to do was sit through some bullshit sermon and then they'd feed up hot soup, fresh rolls, sometimes even a stew, with tea, and biscuits, and sometimes cake if one of the ladies had been in a baking mood. Weeks when the church had a food drive were always the best, canned food heaven according to one of the more 'pious' adults confided in them with a wink as they sat down for their sermon.

Free was really confused by the bible reading. His Italian was pretty good, but there were still words he didn't get, and the reading from the Old Testament was getting him wound up. He stayed quiet though, and the adults pegged his fidgeting as simple restlessness and childish lack of interest. Xanxus however knew that Free was paying attention, a lot of attention, and he wasn't liking what he heard.

"It's all judgement this, and damnation that," the green eyed boy muttered as they queued up with their trays for some food. He kept quiet as they received their bowls of lamb stew and dumplings, cups of lemonade, and a plate with a slice of flapjack. "Fear this, fear that," he continued under his breath when they sat down on one of the benches. "I don't understand. Are they trying to scare people into joining them, or frightening them off?" he asked.

Xanxus shrugged, "Some of them are alright. Most of 'em actually. But the others... Goodie two shoes'll try to take us away if they can. Stick us in Foster cause they don't like kids livin' rough. So don't go anywhere with 'em, don't trust 'em," he told the smaller boy severely, glaring at one of the passing men distrustfully.

The guy sat at the table snorted, "They ain't gunna shove you in a sack and run off kid, dial it down. Most folk here are just trying to do a good thing," he scolded making Xanxus scowl around his spoon of lamb stew. "I ain't saying they're saints. Some of 'em use the bad parts, the hard parts, of the book to justify being assholes to others. Others genuinely buy into that 'Love Thy Neighbour' crap and want ta bring you into the fold in order to save yer soul from damnation, goodie two shoes as you said. But kid, if you believe it, then you believe it, and more power to you. If you don't, you don't. Simple as. Don't shit on other people just 'cause you disagree," he scolded, pointing his spoon at them.

Harry grimaced when he felt Xanxus bristle next to him, he needed to distract his friend before he started a fight. "Swap your lemonade for a dumpling?" he asked, knowing Xanxus wouldn't take it because he hated dumplings more than lemonade and would rather have the lemonade which he also didn't like. He said it made the back of his mouth feel slimy and gross.

Xanxus scoffed at him and pointedly shoved the dumpling and lemonade at him with a grossed out expression on his face.

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'Ndrangheta caught up with them eventually.

Both Xanxus and Free had been scavenging food out from behind a chain restaurant, comparing finds as they climbed in and out of dumpsters. It was Free's cry that alerted him from within his dumpster and had him climbing the sides with dirty hands only to freeze on the lip as he took in the scene in front of him. Two men in casual suits, one had Free in a headlock, pinning the squirming child against his side, while the other smiled a little benignly at him from a little further back.

He recognised that one. The same bastard that had taken note of him before, the one that hired his mother out most often when she wore that blue scarf that he hated. He seemed to think that since he gave his mother the euro that fed them, he could but into their lives whenever he pleased. They never told him when they moved squats, when the old one got builders showing up to usher them away. It was a block of flats now, the old place.

"Xanxus, my boy, I see you're doing well," the man greeted him almost warmly, his smile too tight to be genuine as his dark red-brown gaze flickered over him before sliding to Free who was still trying to worm his neck out from the other man's forearm. "And you've even learned to play with the other children. I'm proud," he declared condescendingly.

Xanxus bared his teeth, his heart hammering in his chest hard enough that he was surprised they couldn't hear it themselves. This was it. The sales pitch. The 'Join us or Join the fishes' offer that he had managed to avoid last time, but couldn't run away from now because they had Free.

"Let him go," he growled out, gaze flickering between the familiar man and his companion who now caught hold of Free's right hand when the pre-teen started to try and ram a pointy elbow into his groin.

The familiar man made a tisking noise as he shook his head, fingers touching his forehead dramatically, "Ahh, ahh," he sighed, "That's no way to ask for a favour, Xanxus. There's always a little give and take in these situations. And right now, we're taken your friend, Free was it? We've taken him, so now you're going to give us a little something and we might return him," he explained playfully, an unpleasant glint in his eye that told Xanxus more than he wanted to know about the situation. He would not be returning Free. No matter what Xanxus gave them. They knew they found his leash and they didn't

plan on letting it go anytime soon. He ground his teeth hard enough to make his jaw ache as he jumped out of the dumpster and squared up to them, hands fisted in his coat sleeves. Glaring with eyes like cinders and rage.

"And what do you want?" he growled.

He sighed in aggravation again, "Again with the _tone_. You really need to watch your manners," the familiar man complained mildly before glancing to his friend and nodding sharply.

Free screamed as his wrist was twisted -

everything exploded at once.

Xanxus had never actually used his fire on people with the intention of hurting them. He'd burnt T-bone once or twice, and the head of the Dock kids, Mateo, once. But that had just been to get them out of his space, never to try and hurt them. But the familiar man, Xanxus went for his _face_ his hands filled with fire and rage.

The unfamiliar man holding Free screeched in concert with the other boy as black became violet and suddenly _everything_ was violet and his world burned.

**0000**

Greasy black stuff was coming out of Free's scar, blinding him as they ran away from the back alley, Xanxus's satchel filled with stolen sandwiches and fruit pots, leaving a dead body and a charred corpse in their wake.

The older of the two didn't question how the younger's hair was now purple, or his eyes, or that he could use a fire like Xanxus now only purple. He just kept running, dragging his friend with him, down towards the beach where they wouldn't be disturbed by anyone but seagulls. He didn't know what that stringy hot black stuff running down his face was, but it was smoking ever so slightly, so instead of trying to explain, he just shoved his friend into the surf and used his sleeve to try and scrape most of it off.

Free didn't fight him, he sat silently in the water and shivered, making small grunts of discomfort when Xanxus was a little too rough over his eyes or nose in his rubbing. But after a couple of minutes and a lot of salt-water, his face was red but clean. The old scar was open, bleeding fresh red blood that watered down and became a pink spiderweb across Free's water-beaded features but they could get Mama to heal it later.

Much later, Xanxus decided as he sat down heavily in the water in front of him and shook.

That was the first time he'd killed a man.

Probably the first time for Free too he realised when the smaller boy shifted into his lap and hugged him tightly, chest to chest, hooking his chin over his shoulder and digging a hand into his steadily dampening hair. No one saw him cry, no one would _ever_ see him cry. But he buried his face in Free's shoulder and sobbed all the same as

he knotted his fingers into the waterlogged overlarge sweater he wore.

**0000**

Free's hair stayed purple for two days and Xanxus found himself obsessively dragging the smaller boy as close to him as possible in the meanwhile. He wasn't happy or comfortable until the smaller child was either holding his hand or in his lap, the only time Free escaped him was when they needed to pee or wash.

Then they learned that it was T-Bone who ratted them out to the 'Ndrangheta. He had become their newest recruit, him and his Graveyard Dogs.

**0000**

They had been hanging out in a carpark after dark, not wanting to risk going near their new squat when there were possible 'Ndrangheta shadowing them, so they decided to sleep rough for a while. It was quite late, the two of them having moved various shopping trolleys into a protective circle around them so if anyone wanted to try to get to them they would have to move the trolleys, and thus wake them. The sound of voices drew them pretty sharply out of sleep and had them crawling over one another to see what was going on down below. Through the mesh of the slope where the cars went down a floor, they could see a lady and a man in the carpark below in front of an expensive looking car.

They were talking and money was being exchanged.

Xanxus had a fair idea what was going on before the woman squatted down and started fumbling with the man's trousers, but Free was still curious and wanted to watch. So they did. They watched as the woman did things to the man's penis with her mouth before he told her to stand up, he bent her over the side of his car with her legs wide open and pushed her skirt up.

Free made a curious noise in the back of his throat, too quiet to be heard by them, but it had Xanxus glancing to him in askance. "Girls have another hole down there. And they don't have dangly bits either. I didn't know," he admitted in barely a whisper before the two went back to watching what Xanxus was pretty certain was a whore.

It was short after that, and involved a lot of grunting, and noise that had Free shifting unhappily and frowning. Then the man made a choking noise while the woman gasped and moaned like Mama did when she had a stomach ache only lighter. Then the man stepped back, and adjusted his trousers while the woman shivered for a moment before standing up as well and adjusting her skirt and panties. More money was given to the woman before the man climbed into his car and the woman walked off towards the lifts.

The two children settled back down in their nest of blankets and bags.

"They sounded like they was dying," Free observed flatly while Xanxus grunted in agreement. As interesting as it was to watch, he didn't think they would be trying to follow suit any time soon. He did wonder why everyone was so obsessed with doing stuff like that, Free

was right, it sounded painful.

**0000**

Summer unexpectedly caught up with them and the two children often ended up spending their afternoons at the beach, playing in the surf, scrambling over the rockpools in search of hermit crabs and other cool things. Free collected various seashells and pretty bits of ocean smoothed glass for his various magical charms that he intended on making, Xanxus caught as many crabs as he could and put them all in a bucket, two at a time, and watched as they started fighting â€“ sometimes even going so far as to poke at them with his knife until they did.

Free never told him that he couldn't swim, he had no need to since he didn't actually go out deeply enough into the water to need to.

But bad luck had a way of striking in unexpected ways when it came to him. A huge wave knocked him off his feet a breath before he got caught in a riptide. Dragging him out into the deeper parts of the ocean, screeching and flailing as he desperately tried to keep his head above the rolling tide.

Then with a crack, he was back on the beach, panting and shaking and immediately being patted down by a confused and equally distressed Xanxus.

"I'm never going swimming again," Free whimpered, clinging tightly to his bestfriend who buried his hands in wet black tangles and rested his chin on top of his head, swallowing hard.

**0000**

Free presented the mess of tiger striped feathers and beads with a beaming smile, "Happy Birthday!" he exclaimed as they sat on the edge of the pier not far from Carlos' crepe-van. They had just finished with their freebies and had been watching the ships come and go when Free had suddenly told him to close his eyes and hold his hands out.

Having no reason to distrust him as he wasn't the type for practical jokes, and would never even think of hurting him, Xanxus had done as his bestfriend asked him to, and found something fluffy being placed into his palms before being told to open them.

"I made them myself!" he exclaimed proudly, "With magic. See, they're for protection and power and vitality â€“ whatever that means, apparently good health but I'm not sure â€“ and the beads all have runes on them. Pink would have worked better for some of them but I know you hate pink, and it's a girls' colour so you wouldn't have worn it," Free rambled as he scooched closer and began to poke at the gift, eagerly showing off each shimmering rune and explaining why he chose them and what they did.

Xanxus let the chatter wash over him and didn't bother to try and remember any of it, that Free had made him something was enough. When he began to wind down he turned his head to him and asked him to tie them into his hair as he remembered seeing native americans with feathers in their hair and liked how fierce their warriors looked.

He shifted feeling the feathers tickle down between his shoulder blades and impatiently swept them over his shoulder. He didn't mind them there, he could ignore the unfamiliar brush of feathers and beads at the side of his neck and on his shoulder, but not down his back. It would drive him nuts.

Free beamed happily that his gift had been well received.

**0000**

T-Bone and his gang were prowling around, they had their orders to report to their higher-ups if Xanxus or Free were spotted in the area, with that in mind... the two decided to be significantly more proactive in dealing with their situation.

"Oi."

The gang paused almost as one, collectively turning in surprise to see the two they were looking for right behind them, neither of which looking very happy. T-Bone shoved his way to the front of his gang, puffing himself up importantly as he attempted to glare the other street kid down. It didn't work. Unlike T-Bone, Xanxus hadn't killed another kid, but rather an adult, an actual Mafioso. Anyone after that was small fry and not scary at all. Not when he knew his special fire was capable of broiling someone's brain in their head, of reducing bone to ash in seconds. Not when he knew that Free was strong enough to crush metal guns as if they were made of tinfoil when he used that purple fire.

"You sent 'Ndrangheta after us," Xanxus declared, cutting to the chase before T-Bone could talk, handily taking control of the conversation right out of the gate. Red eyes narrowed on the other boy who looked a little surprised that they knew, and that his bosses had actually followed through and faced them. Given how Xanxus was alive, and not currently under their thumb, he had assumed that no one had approached them yet â€“ even after he told them the violent boy's only weak spot, that foreign brat. But... they had gone after him? When? Where were they?

He opened his mouth to say something, but Xanxus didn't let him get that far.

Faster than any of the other kids had ever seen, the red eyed boy's hand lashed out and smashed into T-Bone's throat, crushing his adam's apple back into his trachea.

The fight really kicked off then.

Free's hair and eyes flared violet, Xanxus' hands burned amber-red.

Three kids died. Two more would die of their injuries later on. One was permanently crippled.

T-Bone survived, though he would sound like a horror movie villain for the rest of his life.

**0000**

One of the girls from T-Bone's gang started following them around not long later, Xanxus didn't give a shit, but Free did. He didn't like her. The way she kept trying to shimmy her way up to his bestfriend, the way she kept blinking at him like there was something in her eye, if she kept flipping that ratty mess she called hair that hard she'd give herself neckstrain. And she had the most annoying laugh ever.

And she laughed, all, the, time. At everything.

Anything Xanxus said, she would break out into that neighing nostril giggle that put Free's teeth on edge.

He tried to ignore her as best he could, but when she started trying to hang off Xanxus' arm that was when they both told her to get lost. She backed off, somewhat, but kept coming back. Like a fucking mould patch.

Objectively he knew there was nothing wrong with her. She was somewhat pretty, would probably end up whoring as soon as she grew a pair of tits, she could fight pretty well, and she wasn't useless or she wouldn't have lasted long in T-Bone's gang (her laugh wasn't even as bad as he was making it out to be). But he just... viscerally, internally, even when Xanxus wasn't there for her to be annoying at, did not like her. Something about her just repulsed him on a deep internal level, enough so that he couldn't stop himself from sneering the second he laid eyes on her.

That she took unholy glee in needling him just made matters worse. Did she honestly think he couldn't tell when she was lying or trying to manipulate him? It was taking a great deal of self-control not to shove her into moving traffic, and he doubted she would even appreciate just how much if she did know. He set himself to just grinding his teeth and maintaining his temper. She would leave eventually.

She was one of T-Bone's. That meant she was 'Ndrangheta. They would pimp her out eventually.

***0000**

But all good things come to an end.

Xanxus was eleven when his mother moved into a flurry of activity one morning, digging out a red scarf Xanxus had never seen before from somewhere within her plastic bags, she tells him to dress well and to take the feathers out of his hair. He does so only because she so rarely acts like this that he's both worried and curious. He stows them in his pocket and when she snatches his hand up, he doesn't try to pull away, even though she's holding too tight, and her nails are digging in.

He's wrenched through the streets towards the tourist section, and has to fight the urge to dig his feet in. Free had gone to see Elda that morning, he didn't know they were going somewhere. And Xanxus didn't like this situation. The unknown red scarf, his mother's worry and determination to make a good impression (why else would she have told him to smarten up?), and now this, going to the tourist spots near the spa resort up the coast. This was controlled territory. As

close to the 'Ndrangheta main offices as you could get before they left thug life and moved into Blue Collar crime. The kind that had underlings for their underlings and did finances on how many bullets they used. The organised part of crime.

The most dangerous one. Because these people actually cared when one of their own got killed.

"Hey! You!" his mother suddenly called, pulling harder on his arm as she rushed after a fancy man in a suit. "_Vongola Nono..."

**0000**

BAM.

**One update, fresh off the keyboard with extra scenes compared to the one on my facebook. Because I wanted to update SOMETHING this weekend, and nothing else has been speaking much to me lately. I blame all the chocolate, and my numb butt from being sat minecrafting so much. OTL that game... it's deadly. The hours I have lost to that game. The money I have lost to the travel sickness pills I have to take in order to play it. **

From this point on, the story can go one of two ways. And I'm currently waffling between them.

Do I have Free stay with Xanxus and be raised along with him in the Vongola, or do I have Dumbledore happen and Free become Harry? A ; such a choice. Both are good. Both provide good things and bad ones for the future.

End
file.